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Bachtin and Mishima

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The title of this article may at first seem strange. Michail M. Bachtin, a Soviet scholar, well renowned within scientific literary circles inside, but even more so outside the Soviet Union, and Yukio Mishima, an extravagant, controversial and almost notorious Japanese author — they seem far apart and incompatible.

I had been studying and working on Bachtin for a long time, when I got acquainted with Mishima's works, and already by the first encounter with Mishima I got a strong feeling that he could be interpreted via Bachtin's main ideas. The deeper I got into Mishima's works the more I saw them in the light of Bachtin's ideas, and the more I wanted to try out "my feeling" that Mishima could be analyzed via Bachtin.

So what I want to do here, is to analyze one of Mishima's main works, "Confessions of a Mask" (1949) via Bachtin — the reason for choosing this novel out of many Mishima novels I will give later — but first I will give a short introduction of Bachtin, in this stressing my interpretation of his theories. As for Mishima I take it that he needs no further introduction.

Michail M. Bachtin (1895-1975) is mostly known for his two main productions, the book on Dostoevskij, "Problemy poëtiki Dostoevskogo", and the book on Rabelais, "Tvorčestvo fransua Rable i narodnaja kul'tura srednevekov'ja i renessansa".⁽¹⁾ In the book on Dostoevskij Bachtin emphasizes the mutual relationship between author and hero in Dostoevskij's production, in this creating the term "polyphonia", the idea of two-voicedness⁽²⁾ between the author's and the hero's voices. The book on Rabelais is about carnival culture, its development from antiquity to the Renaissance, transforming the characteristics and structures of the carnival to literature, exemplifying this on Rabelais' production. Besides these two books Bachtin worked on general theoretical problems within aesthetics, methodology, linguistics, historical poetics and the poetics of the literary genres. In his last works he concentrated on the problem of the word, the discourse and the text. Bachtin is known for having created terms like "metalinguistics", which is now generally referred to as "translinguistics", and for the term "the two-sided word". Bachtin is also known for having established the so - called "Bachtin school" in the twenties with two other scholars, V.V. Volo-

šinov and P.N. Medvedev.⁽³⁾

I interpret Bachtin's basic attitude, basic ideas, as dialogical, this idea being more and more outspoken in his works, being the substance of all his theories. All Bachtin's works are built on this dialogical understanding, meaning that in all human relationships from the smallest word, that carries a meaning and manifests a position, to a philosophical understanding of time, that is: on all verbal, literary as non-literary, intersubjective levels there is a dialogical interaction, and the nucleus in this is the dialogue between me and you, between me and someone else, another person (a stranger), as we can only understand and interpret ourselves through and by means of others. And the key word here is the *foreign word*, in Russian *čuzoe slovo*. Our every word is a battlefield for our own word and the foreign word. So the living word is always dialogical.⁽⁴⁾

This dialogical thinking, dialogicity,⁽⁵⁾ can be utilized in literature, especially in prose, and it manifests itself in the two Bachtin literary terms, the polyphonia and carnivalisation. The dialogicity in the polyphonia has its manifestations in the double-voiced word, one voice is directed at the object of the word itself, the other voice is directed at the foreign word. Double-voiced words can be stylization, skaz, ich-Erzählung, parody, hidden and open polemics, hidden and open dialogue. The main thing here is the interaction between the two voices, their direction towards each other, their passivity/activity; and there must be a distance, a conditionality, a certain degree of objectivisation. According to Bachtin the moment the conditionality is lost, the two voices melt together, and the work, the voice, becomes monological.⁽⁶⁾

The dialogicity in carnivalisation, meaning carnival transformed into literature, manifests itself in the ambivalence of the carnivalesque pictures, the grotesque, that is the negation of everything, oppositions, everything upside-down, two different poles, such as life/death, light/dark, beauty/anti-beauty, the creative death, laughter to overcome fear, in short: everything lives on the border of its contradiction.

In my opinion the life and death of Mishima, used as a metaphor for his works, can be read in the view of Bachtin's dialogical ideas. In connection with Mishima I especially find that Bachtin's foreign word is adequate, and I find two manifestations of the foreign word in Mishima's works: one is the foreign word as that which keeps the distance between the author and the hero, maintaining a conditionality, creating a dialogue within Mishima's words, making his words the battlefield of two, at times, divergent voices. An example of this would be Mishima's use of the double-voiced word, the polyphonia, in his autobiographical works. The other is the foreign word in the carnivalesque ambivalence, the battlefield of contradictions, oppositions, in Mishima's works/aesthetics expressed in his fascination of beauty in death, the fight between life and death, the beauty in violence and blood, the energy of this fight being sexuality (by some people called sadomasochism) in Bachtin's

terminology “the creative death”.

I will dare the assertion that the foreign word was Mishima's forte to write, it became his dilemma as a writer and a human being. As long as he could maintain the foreign word, that is, as long as he could keep the distance, let the two voices fight within his words, he could create and stay alive. The moment the two voices melted together, that is, the moment the foreign word disappeared he would stop writing, he would stop living. And that was exactly what happened in my interpretation of Mishima. As for the polyphonia the two voices became one, Mishima became one with his works; his work and life melted into a monologue. As for the creative death-aesthetics, he extinguished the foreign word by outruling one pole of the fight, beauty, choosing the other, death.

I will now demonstrate this by analyzing Mishima's autobiographical work “Confessions of a Mask”, stressing these two sides of the dialogicity more, conclusively and briefly connecting it with Mishima's works and life as a whole.

I have chosen “Confessions of a Mask” out of Mishima's many novels partly because in this autobiographical novel you get clear impressions of both sides of the foreign word (as described above), partly because Mishima, at the head of the novel, has chosen to put a Dostoevskij quotation, a quotation that manifests the dialogicity, a quotation that Bachtin could have used himself, and maybe has, and partly because the title of this novel in itself is dialogical in the Bachtin sense.

The quotation is taken from where Dimitrij Karamazov talks to his brother Aleša about beauty. The quotation ends like this: “The dreadful thing is that beauty is not only terrifying, but also mysterious. God and the Devil are fighting there, and their battlefield is the heart of man. But a man's heart wants to speak only of its own ache. Listen, now I'll tell you what it says.” And Mishima gives the story of his childhood and adolescence, his development towards homosexuality and recognition of this. And the battlefield is Mishima's heart: the battlefield of Mishima the author's words with Mishima the hero's words. “Confessions of a Mask” is a true polyphonic story filled with the foreign word. Through the whole novel there is a dialogue between the author and the hero.

On his first falling in love at the age of 14 with a fellow male student Mishima comments: “Could this have been love? Grant it to be one form of love, for even though at first glance it seemed to retain its pristine form forever, simply repeating that form over and over again, it too had its unique form of debasement and decay.”⁽⁷⁾ In this you can not only trace the foreign word between author and hero, but also the foreign word in the ambivalence.

In the polyphonia, the comprehension of the comprehending (acknowledging) subject is dialogical. Mishima finds himself falling in love, not understandable to him, with a girl, and at the sight of her he is overcome with grief: “I was conscious that the feeling was one of remorse. But had I committed a sin for which I should be remorseful? Although a patent contradiction, is there not a sort

of remorse that precedes sin? Was it remorse at the very fact that I existed? Had the sight of her called out to me and awakened this remorse? Or was my feeling possibly nothing but a presentiment of sin?"⁽⁸⁾ In this Mishima also objectivates himself, and according to Bachtin's dialogical ideas, in the polyphonia the hero only gets a true dialogical relationship to himself, if he objectivates himself, that is, puts himself outside. A more clear and, by Mishima (the author), marked example, which even literally speaks of different voices, is this: "Then again a different voice mocked me, secret and persistent. This voice was filled with an almost feverish honesty, a human feeling I never had experienced before. It bombarded me with questions in quick succession. Is it love you feel? If so, all right. But do you have a desire for women? Aren't you deceiving yourself when you say that it's toward her alone you have never had a "lustful desire". And Mishima goes on questioning himself, ending like this: "But remember that it wasn't a picture of Sonoko that arose in my mind last night. Whatever it was your fantasy was strange and unnatural enough to amaze even me *who have become so accustomed to watching by your side.*"⁽⁹⁾ [my italics]. Mishima is even conscious of the foreign words and sometimes comments on this like here (the sound of Sonoko playing the piano makes him "fall in love" with her): "And for all that the fact remains that the sound of that piano took possession of me, and for me it was — *if the dark connotations can be omitted from the word* — veritably a thing of "destiny"."⁽¹⁰⁾ [my italics]. So in this extract it becomes foreign word about foreign word.

Via this dialogical attitude, through the foreign word, the distance, the conditionality is kept, and this can often take the form of irony, of humour, and this is often the case in "Confessions of a Mask", where Mishima keeps a humorous distance to himself, at times desperate (Mishima is talking to two fellow students, both suffering from some kind of disease): "I was the only one who did not have genuine lung trouble. I was pretending instead that I had a bad heart. In those days one had to have either medals or illness."⁽¹¹⁾

The foreign word is here expressed in "parenthesis", the same is the case for the foreign word expressed in polemics, open or hidden, and the polemic foreign word often gets the form of adverbials or adverbial phrases, like: "*Actually*, for me marriage would probably be some grave happiness. Grave enough — *let me see — well*, to stir the hairs on my body."⁽¹²⁾ [my italics].

According to Bachtin the author of the polyphonic novel is interested, concerning the hero, not in the question: "who is he?" — but in the hero's question to himself: "who am I?" — which means that it is not the author, but the hero who gets the last word about himself via his self-consciousness, and as there is no higher last authority to answer the question, the polyphonic hero will always be eternal function, unfinished and never identical with himself. This is very much so in "Confessions of a Mask" — throughout the novel Mishima is questioning himself in a dialogue with the author, a dialogue made dynamic by the friction of the two voices. It *is* the confessions of a mask, and it *stays*

the confessions of a *mask*, we do not get a “twelve o'clock: unmask!” in the end. The author does not get the last word. We do not get a finished, characteristic whole picture of the hero, we do not get an artistic answer to the question: “who is he?” — we do not see, who he is, but only how he sees and understands himself. We do not watch him aesthetically, but only the way he himself becomes aware of the reality, his reality.

“Confessions of a Mask” ends with his definite parting with his adolescence beloved one, whom he has completely forgotten as they sit in a bar, because he is watching and fascinated by a group of young muscular men. And even in his last words there is the ambivalence, the peeping up of the foreign word: “The group had apparently gone to dance, and the chairs stood empty in the blazing sunshine. Some sort of beverage had been spilled on the table top and was throwing back glittering, *threatening reflections*,”¹³ [my italics] .

So throughout the novel the foreign word is there to keep the distance between author and hero, to prevent their two voices from melting into one, the result of which is a dynamic ping-pong between author and hero.

In the Dostoevskij quotation in the beginning of “Confessions of a Mask” Dimitrij Karamazov asks: “Is there beauty in Sodom?” and he answers himself: “Believe me, most men find their beauty in Sodom,” Mishima did, and he discovered this early in his childhood. In “Confessions of a Mask” he describes, how out of Andersen’s fairy-tales only “The Rose Elf” threw deep shadows over his heart (:the elf was stabbed to death while kissing the rose), and he writes: “[] my hearts leaning toward Death and Night and Blood would not be denied.”¹⁴ This death/blood fascination Mishima discovers is for him connected with sexuality. Mishima gets his first ejaculation seeing a reproduction of Guido Reni’s “St. Sebastian” (who was shot with arrows and left to die): “The arrows have eaten into the tense, fragrant, youthful flesh and are about to consume his body from within with flames of supreme agony and ecstasy.”¹⁵ But this is not just sadomasochism for the sake of eventual sado-masochistic readers — it is for Mishima beauty, and it is described as beauty. Later, he describes St. Sebastian like this: “And was not such beauty as his a thing destined for death?” In Mishima’s blood pictures there is beauty, in Mishima’s death pictures there is life, and vice versa, a truly upside-down world like in the carnival, sometimes getting the form of the carnivalesque grotesque, always being ambivalent and always containing the foreign word.

The description Mishima gives of the people in Tokyo by the end of the war, where everything is turned upside-down, where everything lives on the border of its contradiction, corresponds to Bachtin’s understanding of the people during carnival, transformed into literature. Mishima ends his description this way: “The people had reached the *limits of desperation* and were now going about their affairs with *cheerful faces*,”¹⁶ [my italics].

Mishima's own ambivalence in connection with death/life, the struggle between the two, he expresses like this in "Confessions of a Mask" (when he escaped being summoned to the army, he ran as quickly as he could and wonders): "Did it mean that I wanted to live after all [] what was this but a desire to live? Then suddenly my other voice spoke up within me, telling me that never even once had I truly wanted to die."¹⁷ These desires of his between life and death he himself calls strange and sensual, and in these sexual games, where the two opposite poles must be present to keep the game vivid, he wants to think of himself as a person: "who alone could never die", "as a person who had been forsaken even by Death".¹⁸ In Bachtin's carnivalisation "death becomes a moment of life",¹⁹ in Mishima's words expressed this way: "And again, even more than before, I found myself deeply emersed in a desire for death. It was in death I had discovered my real "life's" aim."²⁰

Mishima's contemplations of committing suicide get more and more outspoken, but still he keeps the distance, the two poles, the life/death idea is still present. This extract is to me a clear example of the ambivalence, containing the foreign word, which keeps the conditionality, the objectivisation, and, most important, the humour, that is to say, the dialogue between the two voices is still there: "No — no matter how I considered it, the season was not auspicious for suicide. Instead I was waiting for something to do me the favour of killing me. And this, in the final anlysis, is the same as to say that I was waiting for something to do me the favour of keeping me alive."²¹

Apparently Mishima waited for another 20 years, letting the dialogue between the two voices be the source to keep him alive, meanwhile being the outspoken inspiration of his writing. And whatever made him make up his mind to kill himself, this "whatever" first extinguished the foreign word, making his dialogue a monologue.

In this span of 20 years from "Confessions of a Mask" to Mishima's suicide, you can trace the foreign word in Mishima's enormous production, as the foreign word in the hidden dialogue between author and hero, as the foreign word in his death/beauty/sexuality aesthetics. It keeps him going as an author, which he was aware of himself: "I [] have no way to survive but to keep on writing one line, one more line, one more line....."²²

The crisis indicated in this gets stronger and stronger, and Mishima ends up choosing "the river of action" to the "river of writing", expressed like this by himself: "In this new river I have encounters of soul with soul without having to bother about words. [] Only let me say this: I, born a man and alive as a man, cannot overcome the temptation to follow the course of this river."²³

And following the course of this river and not the river of writing, Mishima finally drowns the foreign word, in his case being the dialogue between life and death. As long as Mishima lived, the foreign word existed in his writing, also by the fact that he was writing, that is there was a dialogue between his own word and the foreign word, a distance between him and his art, but by com-

mitting suicide he removed the foreign word that kept the required distance between fiction and non-fiction, he extinguished the foreign word by becoming one with his fiction, by dying the way he did.

While the dialogue was still the inspiration Mishima would write in "Confessions of a Mask": "[] I somehow looked forward to death impatiently, with a sweet expectation. [] Thus, I longed for the great sense of relief that death would surely bring, if only like the wrestler, I could wrench the heavy weight of life from my shoulders. [] I thought that if by any chance I should attain "glorious death in battle" (how ill it would have become me!), this would be a truly ironical end of my life, and I could laugh sarcastically at it forever from the grave."⁽²⁴⁾

Mishima staged his own glorious death, but it was certainly not, and still isn't, looked upon as a glorious death. Mishima is surrounded by taboos in Japan, not that you cannot talk about him, but you cannot say that you like his writing, maybe because he did something Japanese in a very un-Japanese way, a true anachronism. Thus, people, in my opinion, cannot divorce his work from his life, thus, not seeing that he through the foreign word (you can give that expression other names) kept the required distance, in his own words "the irony". I certainly hope Mishima laughs at it all sarcastically from his grave, this laugh being his eternal manifestation of the foreign word and the ambivalence.

Notes

(1) Michail M. Bachtin: *Problemy poétiki Dostoevskogo*. Moskva, 1972 (in translation: *Probleme der Poetik Dostoevskijs*. München 1971)

Michail M. Bachtin: *Tvorčestvo fransua Rable i narodnaja kul'tura srednevekov'ja i renessansa*. Moskva, 1965 (in translation: *Rabelais and his world*. Cambridge, Mass., London, 1968)

(2) In Russian: "dvugolosnost"

(3) Some people regard Medvedev and Vološinov as pseudonyms for Bachtin.

(4) Bachtin gives this definition of the foreign word: "A foreign word (utterance, work of speech) I understand as every word that belongs to any other human being, said or spoken in his language, that is the foreign word is any word that is not mine. In this sense all words (utterances, speech - or literary works) except my own are foreign words." M.M. Bachtin: "Iz zapisej 1970-71 godov," in *Éstetika slovesnogo tvorčestva*. Moskva, 1979, p.347 [my translation]

(5) In Russian: "dialogičnost"

(6) see *Problemy poétiki Dostoevskogo*.

(7) Yukio Mishima: *Confessions of a Mask*. Tuttle, Tokyo, 1984 (trans. Meredith Weatherby) p.72

(8) *ibid.* p.144

(9) *ibid.* p.173-74

(10) *ibid.* p.129

(11) *ibid.* p.180

- (12) *ibid.* p.191
- (13) *ibid.* p.255
- (14) *ibid.* p.2
- (15) *ibid.* p.39
- (16) *ibid.* p.217
- (17) *ibid.* p.139
- (18) *ibid.*
- (19) see *Tvorčestvo fransua Rable i narodnaja kul'tura srednevekov'ja i renessansa.*
- (20) *Confessions of a Mask*, p.183
- (21) *ibid.* p.208
- (22) Quoted from Henry Scott Stokes: *The life and death of Yukio Mishima*. Tuttle, Tokyo, 1983, p. 111
- (23) *ibid.* p.193
- (24) *Confessions of a Mask*, p.127